

7.26.08: California crusade to abolish plastic bags gaining support

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By Terry Rodgers
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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It used to be smoking. Now it's plastic.

Those ubiquitous plastic bags handed out at retail outlets are now the hottest thing to hate among California's coastal watchdog groups.

Ocean activists have declared war on disposable plastics because of the threat they pose to marine life. A growing number of politicians are starting to jump aboard the bag-ban bandwagon.

"Paper or plastic? How about neither?" Lt. Gov. John Garamendi said during an appearance in San Diego yesterday. Garamendi, who is positioning himself to run for governor in 2010, voiced support for a statewide program to reduce marine debris.

Marine debris includes everything from abandoned fishing nets to disposable cigarette lighters. But if there were such a thing as a wanted poster for molesting the ocean, it would contain the image of a plastic bag.

The trend can be traced to San Francisco's action in March to ban single-use plastic bags at high-volume grocery stores and pharmacies. Stores have the option to give out paper bags or compostable plastic bags made from cornstarch.

Similar restrictions were enacted by Manhattan Beach and Malibu. This week, Los Angeles adopted a policy calling for a ban on plastic carry-out bags by 2010, unless the state imposes a 25-cent fee for customers who ask for them.

Ban-the-bag crusades also have sprouted in San Diego County, but lawmakers here are being cautious. Solana Beach was the first to act. In December, the city banned plastic bags used for advertising from being thrown onto driveways or hung from doorknobs.

The next push came from a petition drive in Encinitas organized by the Surfrider Foundation. The signatures prompted the City Council in June to explore a possible ordinance to curb single-use bags. A report outlining various options is being drafted by a citizens committee.

On Wednesday, San Diego Coastkeeper, a local environmental group, urged the San Diego City Council's environmental issues committee to consider legislation to reduce plastic bags.

Lobbyists for the plastics industry and restaurant association issued sharp objections, complaining they had learned of the hearing at the last minute.

Other than agreeing that all sides should be heard and expressing concern that imposing fees on plastic bags could be a burden to low-income families, members of the Natural Resources and Culture Committee could hardly contain their ambivalence.

"I don't think it raised a whole lot of excitement," said Councilwoman Donna Frye, who chairs the committee.

Nonetheless, Frye said she will hold another hearing in September to allow opponents of a bag ban to articulate their concerns and bring legislative options into sharper focus.

Baykeeper attorney and policy expert Gabriel Solmer was disappointed by the committee's unenthusiastic reaction.

"We're concerned that the committee doesn't understand the urgency of this issue and the hazards of waiting," Solmer said.

Frye, who is perceived by many as the council's environmental champion, hinted that advocates of a bag ban face an uphill battle.

"I think it's still up to debate whether a bag ban accomplishes a significant reduction in marine debris," Frye said.

A San Francisco Bay Area lawyer, Stephen Joseph, recently launched a counter-bag-ban crusade with a Web site called SaveThePlasticBag.com.

“The anti-plastic campaign is based on myths that are repeated over and over again on the Internet,” Joseph said. “Decision-makers have bought into these myths without asking questions and checking facts.”

Environmentalists have erroneously claimed that plastic bags are made from crude oil, when in fact nearly all of those manufactured in the U.S. are made from natural gas, he said.

“The best solution is to offer people a third choice, which is to offer reusable bags but keep the plastic and paper choice there, too,” Joseph said.

The plastics industry contends that bans are self-defeating because they discourage ongoing efforts to increase recycling of plastic bags.

A state law in effect the past year requires high-volume supermarkets to install recycle bins at their stores. The law also prohibits local governments from imposing fees on plastic bags. A new bill, AB 2058 by Assemblyman Lloyd Levine, D-Van Nuys, would repeal that prohibition.

The marine debris reduction program endorsed by Garamendi was developed by the state's Ocean Protection Council. It calls for a multilayered strategy that includes enhanced public education, increased recycling and possible user fees on plastic litter.

Terry Rodgers: (619) 542-4566; terry.rodgers@uniontrib.com

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